



Dr Hawa Abdi

# Practising medicine amongst Somalia's IDPs

In the midst of chaos and violence in Somalia, one woman in particular is making a positive contribution. Hawa Abdi is a gynaecologist with a practice in a 26-hectare compound that has become a camp for thousands of displaced Mogadishu residents fleeing the fighting between Ethiopian-backed government forces and their opponents.

Abdi was one of the few female professors in the Medical School of the University of Somalia before the collapse of the Somali state in 1990. Her practice, set up in the 1980s some 20 km south of Mogadishu, had both in-patient and out-patient facilities. But with the civil war of the 1990s, her successful practice crumbled. "Back then every one of my patients could afford to pay for the services. Now it is a different story," says Abdi.

She now cares for thousands of internally displaced people – who cannot afford to pay for her services. "Most of the people in my compound cannot afford to pay for their lunch, so how can I ask them to pay for my services? Most days I work 15 hours and sometimes more but I am thankful that my daughter [also a doctor] is with me and has been by my side through it all."

Abdi finds running the practice and helping people both personally and professionally satisfying. Her compound has not been targeted and is, she says, "respected by all sides throughout the civil war as a neutral zone where anyone can seek help."

The main challenge is finding supplies, whether medicines, food or water. "It is a constant struggle to provide the basics, even for my

staff." Most of the compound's 72 staff are volunteers. UNHCR and the UN World Food Programme are providing some assistance to the displaced but "we need the agencies to scale up much more seriously – and soon," says Abdi, adding that agencies should focus primarily on children, the most vulnerable.

Despite enjoying her work, Abdi is growing physically and mentally tired and is losing hope of the situation improving. "When you are hopeful that things will improve, you can go on but when you lose hope then you cannot go on. I see nothing but hopelessness in the faces of the people in the compound."

Abdi is not optimistic that peace will ever come to Somalia. "It is almost as if peace is getting further and further away from us."